

Key Concept 1.5. European society and the experiences of everyday life were increasingly shaped by commercial and agricultural capitalism, notwithstanding the persistence of medieval social and economic structures.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, Europeans experienced profound economic and social changes. The influx of precious metals from the Americas and the gradual recovery of Europe's population from the Black Death caused a significant rise in the cost of goods and services by the 16th century, known as the price revolution. The new pattern of economic enterprise and investment that arose from these changes would come to be called capitalism. Family-based banking houses were supplanted by broadly integrated capital markets in Genoa, then in Amsterdam, and later in London. These and other urban centers became increasingly active consumer markets for a variety of luxury goods and commodities. Rulers soon recognized that capitalist enterprise offered them a revenue source to support state functions, and the competition among states was extended into the economic arena. The drive for economic profit and the increasing scale of commerce stimulated the creation of joint-stock companies to conduct overseas trade and colonization.

Many Europeans found their daily lives altered by these demographic and economic changes. As population increased in the 16th century, the price of grain rose and diets deteriorated, all as monarchs were increasing taxes to support their larger state militaries. All but the wealthy were vulnerable to food shortages, and even the wealthy had no immunity to recurrent lethal epidemics. Although hierarchy and privilege continued to define the social structure, the nobility and gentry expanded with the infusion of new blood from the commercial and professional classes. By the mid-17th century, war, economic contraction, and slackening population growth contributed to the disintegration of older communal values. Growing numbers of the poor became beggars or vagabonds, straining the traditional systems of charity and social control. In eastern Europe, commercial development lagged and traditional social patterns persisted; the nobility actually increased its power over the peasantry.

Traditional town governments, dominated by craft guilds and traditional religious institutions, staggered under the burden of rural migrants and growing poverty. The Reformation and Counter-Reformation stimulated a drive to regulate public morals, leisure activities, and the distribution of poor relief. In both town and country, the family remained the dominant unit of production, and marriage remained an instrument of families' social and economic strategies. The children of peasants and craft workers often labored alongside their parents. In the lower orders of society, men and women did not occupy separate spheres, although they performed different tasks. Economics often dictated later marriages (European marriage pattern). However, there were exceptions to this pattern: in the cities of Renaissance Italy, men in their early 30s often married teenaged women, and in eastern Europe, early marriage for both men and women persisted. Despite the growth of the market economy in which individuals increasingly made their own way, leisure activities tended to be communal, rather than individualistic and consumerist, as they are today. Local communities enforced their customs and norms through crowd action and rituals of public shaming.